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Knapp: County needs to sharpen focus on biotech

State investment ups the ante in a competitive and growing industry

by Sean R. Sedam | Staff Writer

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Montgomery County needs to step up its game in order to factor into the state's plan for the future of the biotechnology industry, County Council President Michael J. Knapp said.

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Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) has proposed a 10-year, \$1.1 billion biotechnology plan that would guide state investment in tax credits and its technology incubator network and venture program, as well as stem cell research, nanotechnology and the creation of the Maryland Biotechnology Center.

Montgomery County should be a big part of the plans, said Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown.

"I want to work with [the governor] to make sure we both serve what is already the driving engine for the state," he said.

Last month Knapp attended the BIO International Convention in San Diego, where Maryland had a strong presence of about 50 exhibition booths in the state's pavilion and the competition for biotechnology investment was evident.

"The state of the industry report said that every jurisdiction in the country is trying to do something bio," he said. "Competition is no longer with just a few jurisdictions. Now competition is with everybody, and everybody was there."

Knapp said that he felt O'Malley snubbed Montgomery County during a news conference in San Diego highlighting the Milliken Institute's ranking of Maryland as the No. 2 state in fostering technology and science industries.

O'Malley recognized several regions of the state for their contributions to the biotechnology industry, but left out Montgomery, which is home to about 60 percent of the state's 370 biotech firms.

An O'Malley spokesman said that the governor recognizes Montgomery's importance to the industry in Maryland and that nothing was meant by the omission. Knapp said the incident, combined with the lack of specificity in the governor's biotech plan, is a concern.

"To not include something [in the plan] that includes Montgomery County, I guess, caught me off guard," he said.

O'Malley's initiative and a county biosciences task force announced by Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) last month have people talking, which is positive, Knapp said.

Now the county needs to go beyond talking.

"Most people seem to know what we need to be doing," Knapp said. "Now it's a matter of, how do we specifically implement those things?"

The county task force needs to consider how to establish management training programs and mentoring programs in the public-private sector, as well as how to recruit and to incorporate the

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life sciences in the schools curriculum, he said.

“We have a lot of the science,” Knapp said. “What we don’t have is the management expertise.”

County officials are focused on helping companies to take technology from the lab to the marketplace.

“It is clear that one of the county’s key future employment and corporate growth opportunities rests with the ability of our existing and emerging biotech cluster to translate their valuable inventory of basic research and intellectual property into marketable products,” Pradeep Ganguly, director of the county’s Department of Economic Development, said in a statement.

The county task force, whose members are expected to be named soon, will build on the work of the state’s Life Sciences Advisory Board. The board’s early recommendations formed the foundation of O’Malley’s plan.

The governor’s initiatives struck the right balance, said Jonathan Cohen, president and CEO of GeneSystems Inc. in Rockville.

“They got it right,” Cohen said. “By and large they got it right from my perspective. There’s a recognition that biotech has longer development time and higher risk ... and higher reward.”

Staff Writer C. Benjamin Ford contributed to this report.

